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SUBJECT: RISE OF CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN ALGERIA

REF: A. (A) ALGIERS 162

[1](#)B. (B) ALGIERS 977

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (U) While the overall numbers are very modest compared to the still overwhelming Muslim population, Algeria is currently experiencing an unprecedented rise in conversions to Christianity, particularly by the Berber population in the Kabylie region. Driving this trend are several factors, including: anti-Arab traditions in the Kabylie, social and economic grievances, the greater availability of religious literature and economic grievances, the appeal of the Christian message to a region that sees itself as dispossessed, and a perhaps subconscious desire of Berbers to return to their pre-Islamic Christian roots.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Although the GOA downplays any concern about being disturbed by Christianity or its registered churches, Islamic clergy have reacted negatively and a continued sharp increase in conversions could, over time, inject new tensions into already tenuous relations between the Kabylie and central government. It could also subject agreement seeking to limit Islamic influences in the schools and in public life to new pressures from religious conservatives. (End Summary).

CHRISTIANITY GAINING ACCEPTANCE,

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to the Catholic Archbishop of Algeria, who has lived all his life in Algeria, and a longtime American Methodist Pastor, who has lived in Algeria for over forty years and who has served as President of the Association of Protestant Churches of Algeria for much of that time, they have never seen Christianity in Algeria as robust as it is today. Conversions were occurring much more frequently than in the past and the state, while not tolerating overt proselytizing, was taking a permissive approach to this social and religious phenomenon. Both men were generally positive about the future of Algeria and the prospects for Christianity in Algeria, while noting less enlightened views within parts of the Islamic community and leadership. Reflecting this duality, the American pastor experienced an outpouring of Muslim support after he was stabbed (ref A) outside his home in January, in what appeared to be a religiously motivated attack.

OUTSIDE MEDIA AND INTERNAL ACCEPTANCE FUEL CHANGE

[1](#)4. (SBU) According to the Archbishop and the Pastor, several factors accounted for greater acceptance of conversions to Christianity. First, the sheer number of conversions made the practice more acceptable. In some small villages in the Kabylie, for example, entire families have converted, making up to fifty percent of the village Christian. Second, Algerians themselves were converting Algerians, so the stigma of foreign interference dissipated. Finally, the availability of Bibles and the rise in the number of Christian-themed television and radio broadcasts available via satellite TV, such as Radio Monte Carlo, was apparent. There were also religious broadcasts in Tamazight from Cyprus and Malaga, Spain. As an example of just how acceptable Christianity had become, the Archbishop recounted a story of a Muslim woman who went out of her way to proudly introduce her cousin and inform the Archbishop that she was Christian.

BERBERS CONVERT MORE THAN ARABS AND FOR CULTURAL REASONS

[1](#)5. (SBU) The Pastor believed there was a difference between Arab and Berber motives for conversion. Berbers motives were more complex and rooted in a mixture of rejecting the violence of Islamic extremists and attempts to "Arabize" Berber culture. Converting to Christianity was also a form of social and economic protest against a Muslim governing system that had left the Kabylie one of the poorest, most disaffected regions in the country. At a deeper level, Berbers were acknowledging the failures of the current system

and returning to their pre-Islamic roots and Christian heritage. (St. Augustine was a Berber of the 4th century.) Even today, Christian symbols that have lost their religious meaning for most Kabylies appear on bread, entryways, jewelry, and embroidery. For Arabs, on the other hand, it was a question of spirituality based more in adopting the ideas of the religion itself and less in its cultural aspects. He added that the number of Berber conversions far outpaced the number of Arab conversions.

PRESS COVERAGE OF RISE IN CONVERSIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

16. (U) A five-page article appeared in Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent of May 21 entitled, "Jesus Christ on Algerian Soil." Citing UN statistics, the article said approximately 10,000 Catholics and 5,000-20,000 Protestants were present in Algeria in 2002, but the author claimed the numbers were now dramatically higher due to the many "house churches". These small churches operated usually from individual homes without GOA registration. Religious messages and Bibles were increasingly available in Berber, French and Arabic.

17. (U) According to the article, the rise in Christianity was not confined to the Berber Kabylie region but was nationwide, including a large group in Oran. Further, the article agreed with the American Pastor's conclusion that Algerians, many of whom had no contact with American or European evangelists, were converting other Algerians. In several cases, individuals converted family members to Christianity because of its peaceful teachings and message of hope.

GOVERNMENT REACTION GENERALLY MIXED

18. (SBU) GOA reaction to the rise in Christianity has been mixed. Although the article in Jeune Afrique commented on how the Algerian Police dealt positively with the Christian community, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Bouabdellah Ghoulamallah, was more negative during a radio interview: "Christians are more than welcomed to practice their faith in Algeria, but I know that some churches are behaving like sects and this is what we can not tolerate....Sects have no future in Algeria, and although we are at the observation stage, we are in the process of elaborating a national strategy against this dangerous form of proselytism, bearing in mind at the same time that we have to respect our Constitution."

19. (SBU) Ministry of Religious Affairs Director for Koranic teaching, Dr. Mohammed Aissa, told POLOFF that the GOA favored religious diversity and was not at all concerned about the rise in Christianity. However, he was concerned that some people in Algeria who did not like the current trend might take matters into their own hands. His concerns regarding Christian conversions were based on potential social problems, and conversions involving manipulation. He had no quarrel with Christians, or with Christian churches registered with the GOA, but was concerned that unregistered churches acted outside the societal bounds that officially recognized churches followed. He clarified that registered Christian churches in Algeria were totally autonomous from the Ministry and had more latitude for their sermons than mosques, which were given general guidelines from the Ministry.

10. (SBU) During an interview on April 3, the reaction from President of the High Islamic Council Cheikh Bouamrane was not as positive. In reference to the rise in conversions to Christianity in the Kabylie region, Bouamrane questioned why, when the GOA had proof that an evangelization campaign existed, the MFA and MOI had not withdrawn the authorization given to the "neo-conservative church" in Tizi Ouzou, or deported foreigners involved in proselytizing. He also contended that the church misrepresented the image of Islam and has spread hostile discourse against the Algerian state. Bouamarane confirmed that the High Islamic Council sent a delegation to Kabylie to investigate the situation and would submit a report to Bouteflika.

11. (SBU) An American who resided in Algeria and ran a small business with his wife, was arrested and deported in May (ref B). Although no official reason for the deportation was given, there are indications he was deported for alleged proselytizing. The American told Conoff that he had distributed several Bibles to friends, at their request. Algerian officials told the American's wife to make arrangements to close the business and depart Algeria, as her visa would not be renewed. She has since left Algeria but officials made her departure difficult. The officials confiscated her residency permit, refused her an exit visa, and wanted her to sign a document referring to a decision by

the MOI regarding her departure (she was not permitted to see the decision from the MOI). She was finally allowed to leave the country without signing the document by showing a copy of her residency permit to another official.

AVAILABILITY OF OUTSIDE RESOURCES

12. (U) Three of the main Christian-themed broadcasts available via satellite were French-language Radio Monte Carlo, Cairo-based Arabic-language Al-Haya TV, and French/German TV channel ARTE. Another influence, available with the help of technology, was a French-language internet forum on conversion to Christianity, which was popular in the Kabylie region. In addition to the influences from technological advances, there were also two Bible stores operating in the capital, which offer Christian literature in a variety of languages.

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